THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

TOO MUICH GRACE?
November 14, 1999

John M. Buchanan

"Conversion is frightening to oneself, and to others, precisely because it can seem like a regression. One's adult certainty about the world is shaken, and this can feel like being sent back to square one. Gradually, however, one learns to discern the adult command behind Jesus' saying 'whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' (Mark 10:15) This is not an exhortation to become childish, or to nurture one's inner child. Instead, it reminds us that the grace of childhood lies in being receptive, with an open mind and with gratitude for the seemingly limitless nourishment that has come your way.

Kathleen Norris
Amazing Grace

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TOO MUCH GRACE?

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Matthew 20:1-16

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:16)

Startle us, O God, with your amazing grace, which is before us and behind us, above and below us; your love that surrounds us while we are here and in every minute of every day, even and especially moments when we are busy and not thinking about you. O God, speak your word to us. Remind us of your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The late Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian, once said that, "The hardest thing for us to understand is how God can love all human beings with the same unlimited love, while at the same time loving each of them in a totally unique way . . ." Nouwen went on, "Somehow, we think we can only fully enjoy our being loved by God if others are loved less than we are." (*Lifesigns,* p.46)

Every child, I suppose, wonders how it is that parents can love more than one child equally and yet uniquely. God loves each of us, Augustine said, as if there were only one of us to love. But it doesn't often feel like that—in the context of family life. "You always loved her more than you loved me," the child says, sometimes in jest, sometimes in deadly seriousness.

Phillip Gulley has written an essay, "The Second Child," which illustrates how parental love is experienced differently by different children. When the first child was born they had to add a room to house his photography collection after three months. When a second child came, after three months, the only photograph was the one taken at the hospital, the one with the scrunched up face that looks like everybody else's baby—and for all anyone really knows, may be someone else's. Gulley thinks there's a factory somewhere cranking out a dozen different goofy baby pictures, and the nurse just hands you one that resembles your child.

First children have enormous wardrobes. Second children wear hand-me-downs. First children are treated like porcelain, second children like tupperware. Gulley tells the best one—which I've used before, but it fits here—"When your first child drops a pacifier, you boil it for ten minutes. When the second child drops a pacifier, you tell the dog to fetch." (*Front Porch Tales,* p. 92-94)

It is difficult to understand that God loves all equally and each uniquely. It is not easy to accept the fact that my enemies are not also God's enemies, or that the people who so flagrantly abuse the standards of integrity, faithfulness and justice, to which I am committed, are somehow loved by God, as I am.

It must have been late in their life together, near the end in fact, when one of his disciples finally said what they all had been thinking. They had followed him up and down Galilee for three years. They had walked away from their families and jobs, away from the comfort of home and routine. They had gone hungry, slept on the ground, been cold and wet and tired. And now, at this very moment, it appears that he's decided to go to Jerusalem, and they're not sure they'll get out alive. His enemies will be waiting for him and them. They've given quite a bit, actually, sacrificing everything for him, for his love and grace. And they've observed over the three years how he has accepted into his company people who were not really very acceptable; people who had not sacrificed anything; people who, as a matter of fact, were not very good people. It didn't seem to bother him. He had continued to dine with tax collectors, dishonest, treasonous quislings who worked for the Romans and got rich off their own people's oppression, and prostitutes, of all people. And so finally, I think Peter, surely it was Peter, or maybe John, the beloved, or perhaps Judas, the bookkeeper, said what they all were thinking: 'Surely, Jesus, you don't think as much of them as you think of us. Surely you don't love them as much as you love us. Surely they, traitors and prostitutes, are not worth as much to you as we are after all we've done for you. Where's the fairness in that?'

And so he told a story. It is a story specifically for privileged insiders, for the very ones who would ask that question. It is a disturbing story—about the radical nature of grace—too much grace, in fact.

A landowner goes to the town square where laborers gather every day looking for work. It's a kind of labor market not unlike the system still in use where migrant workers follow the harvest. He hires a group at sunrise, the official beginning of the work day—about 6:00 a.m. It's a big harvest. Maybe it looks like rain, maybe there is a chill in the air and a threat of a ruinous freeze. In any event, he returns to the labor market at 9:00 a.m. and hires another group of workers. At noon and at 3:00 p.m., he's back again, hiring a third and fourth group. And at 5:00, not long before sunset, he hires a fifth group to help finish the job.

Laborers are paid daily at sunset and the owner begins with the last group hired. To their absolute delight, they receive a full day's pay. I know who else is delighted as well—all the other laborers who know that if these people who worked just a few hours received a full wage, they, who worked all day, from dawn, through the blazing heat of midday, who did most of the work, surely they will be rewarded appropriately. And so when their turn comes to be paid, and they receive the same amount, the full amount but no more, the amount they negotiated at the beginning of the day, they are offended. They complain and the essence of their complaint is this: "You have made them equal to us." It's not just money, it's status, position, personal value. "We worked all day. They worked one hour. We're sorry—that's not fair." And the owner responds—gently—'Take what you have and go . . . Are you envious because I am generous?'

This is not a business plan. A commercial enterprise that tried to operate on the basis of equal pay for unequal work would soon be hard pressed to find anyone foolish enough to work all day. My introduction to that kind of injustice, equal pay for unequal work, was blunt. I worked for the city water and sewer department in the summer time during

college. It quickly became apparent that the college boys did the hard and dirty work while the grizzled veterans slept on the truck or went for coffee.

The story is not an economic model, but it does dramatically overturn the conventional way people think about God and about others. In his book, *The God We Never Knew,* Marcus Borg suggests that the concept of God that most of us received in childhood was God as record keeper, finger pointer, stern judge, meeting out punishments. Or, Anne Lamott's High School Principal leafing through your files and not like what he's finding. But in this strange story, God is not keeping score. God is not a celestial accountant keeping books, making entries on the basis of merit accumulated. God's system is based on something other than performance, on the infinite value of persons and it confronts and contradicts everything we think we know about God.

I am always surprised to discover something new in these ancient texts. This time around I found myself focusing on the last group of laborers.

"Why are you standing here?" he asks them. Not 'Do you want to make some quick money?' but 'Why are you still here?' To which they respond: 'Because no one has hired us.' We're still here because nobody needs us, because there is no work for us. And when the owner said, 'You also go into the vineyard,' it wasn't so much a good financial deal as it was a life-affirming, life giving affirmation of their worth. 'I need you! I have work for you to do! You are valuable to me.' The owner cares about the unemployed, the marginal, the left over people, more than he cares about his profit margin, apparently.

Tom Long says the owner cares about the ones the world forgets and marginalizes—"like the left-over kids on a ball field whom nobody wants on the team." (*Westminster Bible Companion, Matthew)*

Do you know what that means? Do you know about an early childhood exercise in the harshest market economics called a pick-up game of baseball? Here's how it goes. A group of children assembles to play a game of baseball. The first two to arrive, or the biggest and strongest, or the ones who own the bat, designate themselves as captains. They then engage in an elaborate ritual involving throwing and catching the bat to determine who will have the first choice from among the other would-be players. First, one chooses, then the other. The best players are chosen first. And with a dreadful and inexorable market logic, the group of unchosen gets smaller as it gets more pathetic athletically. And if there is an odd number of potential players—one is left and the two captains have to decide who has to take him. That moral dilemma was resolved in my childhood by the Sellers twins, who turned out fine as adults, but in their early childhood were awkward and dreadful baseball players, who owned bats and balls and so were always eagerly welcomed, but were so bad that they were always chosen last, one to one team, the other twin to the other.

This owner cares about the marginal, the very ones the world overlooks and leaves behind. This owner cares about personal value which results from being included. This owner sounds a lot like the man whose hospitality reached out to include those society routinely shut out: the unclean, the sinners, the traitors, the prostitutes, and whose

amazing grace ultimately softened and changed the hearts of even his closest friends, the ones who were so sure they deserved and had earned their position in his kingdom.

But there is a question begging to be asked. Does this whole idea of grace undermine any reason for trying to be good? If we all get equal pay, why bother working hard all day. It's a good question.

A simplistic theology of grace sounds like saccharine permissiveness. God loves all, all are included, so why even bother being good and kind and faithful. And carefully and thoughtfully it needs to be said that grace is costly: that grace cost the life of God's son and the life of grace turns out to be one, not of moral relativism, but devoted and disciplined love.

William Muehl, who taught a generation of ministers at Yale Divinity School, once preached a sermon "To Hell with Acceptance," which demolished the simplistic idea of grace as mere acceptance. The Prodigal Son, Muehl said, got up the morning after his welcome home party and was expected to be at work in the field with his older brother. The forgiven spouse is redeemed, not by receiving special treatment but when he/she is expected to rejoin the marriage with all its responsibilities. A man knows that forgiveness and reconciliation have happened, not when his wife treats him with sweet kindness, but when she throws the dish towel at him and says, 'OK, buster, it's your turn to dry.' The laborers who were hired at five now have the opportunity to go to work the next morning at 6:00 because the best news of all is that they are wanted and needed and valued.

Tribune writer Eric Zorn, wrote an unintended commentary on grace in his fine editorial Thursday morning, about the young men who have been expelled from Eisenhower High School in Decatur. There was a fist fight at a football game. Seven African American boys were suspended from school for two years by the School Board—the sole African American member casting the only dissenting vote. Jesse Jackson and PUSH are there advocating for the seven students. Zorn said, correctly, I think, that school board policy further marginalizes the youngsters and almost guarantees a life-time of dysfunction, trouble, and inevitably, crime. Too often, mainstream society does just that—marginalizes the already marginalized and then wonders why it doesn't turn out all right; eliminates Affirmative Action, for instance, and then pretends to be perplexed when racial balance comes apart and racial separation appears again.

Eric Zorn's eminently sensible proposal was that the seven not be accepted back, but put back, given responsibility—to be there every day, to serve on an inter-racial council, to make speeches to elementary schools—in effect, to be told that they have value, that there is work to be done.

Eric Zorn, newspaper man, and William Muehl, theologian, understand Jesus: the purpose of grace is not to allow us to accept the past, but to give us a future.

This is a difficult story that makes us uncomfortable. It challenges deeply held values and opens up a whole new way of thinking about God and one another. And it is, finally, good news—not only for the marginalized, but for all of us. At the end of the first volume of his

trilogy, *Christian Theology in a North American Context,* Douglas John Hall writes simply and eloquently about the final religious mystery—"that God should love."

That is the final mystery—that God should love—the expelled students in Decatur and the ones who expelled them, the all day workers and the one hour workers, the devout church member and the happy pagan home in bed on Sunday morning; the hard working banker and the unemployed drunk; you and me when we deserve love and when we don't deserve love: you and me when we are good and honest and faithful and productive, and you and me when we're not so good and not so honest, faithful and productive.

Author, Anne Lamott, became a Christian, a church person, after a very difficult life of drug and alcohol addiction, disastrous personal relationships, essentially because she discovered, through a remarkable little church, that God loved her, regardless of what she had done. Lamott remembers a friend's experience with a Catholic adoption agency for special children. Inquiring perspective parents are given a questionnaire:
Could you adopt:

> An addicted baby?
> A terminally ill baby?
> A mildly retarded baby?
> A baby with a tendency towards violence?

God is an adoptive parent, Lamott proposes. God says, 'Sure, I'll take the kids who are addicted or terminal. I'll pick all the retarded kids, and of course, the sadists, the selfish ones, the liars . . .So of course," Lamott said, "God loves old ordinary me, even or especially at my most scared and petty and mean and obsessive. Loves me: chooses me." (*Traveling Mercies,* p.255)

Most of us discover along the way, that the best of our relationships are based, not so much on our wonderful attributes, but on someone else's patience, forgiveness, acceptance, grace. And that whatever standing we have with God, likewise, is not, finally, because we are so wonderful, hardworking, upright and righteous, but because God somehow chooses to love us.

It is the final mystery and it is why when Americans are asked their favorite hymn, one is by far the most popular choice. It was written by John Newton, captain of an English slave ship. Tortured by the dreadful slave trade he was serving, Newton began to read *Imitation of Christ,* by Thomas a Kempis, and gradually turned to Christ on the discovery that nothing he had ever done changed the love of Christ for him. He became an Anglican priest, and he wrote a hymn about his own life and about grace. I think we know about grace because we hunger for it and long for it and maybe have experienced just enough of it to know that it can save our lives by telling us that we matter, that we are of value, that we are needed, that there is work for us to do—that there is one who loves us with an amazing steadiness—an amazing consistency—an amazing tenacity—a truly Amazing Grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen

November 14

Prayers of the People

O God, creator and ruler of the universe, "you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and the earth were born, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God (Psalm 90:1-2)." When we rebelled against you refusing to trust and obey you, you did not reject us, but still claimed us as your own. In the fullness of time, out of your great love for the world, you sent Jesus to be one of us, to redeem us and heal our brokenness (Book of Common Worship)."

As a child is slowly formed in the waters of the womb, so you transform our spirits by your Spirit. "Like a hen gathers her young under her wings, you guard and strengthen us. Continue to carry and labor over us, O God, until we are completely born into your arms that embrace us from infancy to old age." Fill us with patience and strength to undergo the labors of love that give birth to hope, "as we carry your love within us and bear our redemption in Christ into the world."

We are surprised, O God, when you do not act as we expect. You challenge us to rethink what we take for granted. As we grow up into Christ, help us to know what to leave behind and what to preserve at all costs. As members of your household, we pray to be a caring congregation ... "persons who struggle together with complex issues, persons who try to be good stewards of the earth and all of our resources, persons who risk reaching out, persons who dare to share deeply with one another." Keep us open and growing, O God.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we may bear each other's burdens. To those who are hurting this day, O God, bring relief. To those with physical illnesses, grant "the kind of healing only your spirit can give." Touch with your "calming, settling hand those in emotional distress and relational turmoil." Grant renewal to those who have lost a family member or friend, who have lost their confidence or their direction. Bear wholeness to those who face upcoming surgery, who must make hard decisions. Grant satisfaction to all who hunger and thirst for food or justice, relief to those engaged in conflicts or victimized by war. Deliver your people from contempt that they may show mercy to neighbors and adversaries may become allies. Lift up the depressed, befriend

those who grieve, comfort the anxious, stand with victims of abuse and crime. Awaken those who damage themselves and others through addictions. Grant them freedom.

"God of glory, you see how all creation groans in labor as it awaits redemption. As we work for and await your new creation, we trust that you will answer our prayers with grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who teaches us to say together when we pray: OUR FATHER

Carol Allen